Abstract

The main aim of any student who learns a foreign language is ultimately to be able to communicate with people speaking that language. The paper presents some of the difficulties the learners encounter in a foreign language. The teacher has to use different types of communication strategies and encourage the sense of responsibility on the part of the learners who understand the strategies they employ in acquiring the language skills. The learners need adequate opportunities to put the new language into practice in a free context, and to take more risks in dealing with it. They should become active, confident, proficient and autonomous communicators.

1. Introduction

Communication strategies and the learner’s autonomy have become themes of great interest at national and international conferences and in professional journals for a couple of years. We all need either to express our feelings, ideas and opinions or to share all these with people around us. All these express our natural need to communicate. In this respect learning a new language means to be able to communicate with people speaking that language. As teachers, we have both the duty and the responsibility to guide our students in the learning process to develop their communication strategies to become proficient communicators. It is also extremely important to encourage a sense of responsibility on the part of the learners and to implement teaching-learning activities to build up the learners’ autonomy. The learners need to be able to take control over their own learning, to learn independently without neglecting the teacher’s impact on their development towards autonomy.

2. Learning strategies

Strategies are plans of actions to achieve a long-term goal. The concept of learning strategies is a more general term than that of study skills used in the research studies and related to the foreign language teaching. The origin of the word strategy is to be found in the Greek word “strategia” which means “generalship” (where “stratos” means “army” and “ago” means “leading”).

Many researchers have defined the concept of learning strategies from different points of view. Language...
learning strategies can be defined as choices the learners consciously make to manage their learning. Rebecca Oxford defined learning strategies as: “operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information.” The definition is further expanded and includes: “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). As the definition clearly expresses the learning strategies are actions assumed by the learner. His role in the process of learning is of maximum importance. The learner becomes responsible of the strategies used, of the concrete activities practiced, in the learning situations, and of the risks taking to transfer the learning strategies to new situations with other learning tasks.

3. Taxonomy of the language learning strategies

There are many classifications of the Language Learning Strategies made by different authors. These classifications are more or less similar without major or radical changes. In what follows, we present some classifications according to different authors such as: O’Malley, Rubin, Oxford and Stern.

O’Malley’s (1985) classifies Language Learning Strategies into three main categories:
1. Metacognitive Strategies; they require planning for learning, they are conscious, deliberate actions;
2. Cognitive Strategies; they refer to specific tasks, they involve direct manipulation of the material;
3. Socioaffective Strategies; they are related to social-mediating activities and involve interaction with others.

Rubin (1987) considers that there are three types of strategies used by the learners that contribute directly or indirectly to the language learning. They are as follows:
1. Learning Strategies;
2. Communication Strategies;

Learning Strategies contribute directly to the development of the language system and are of two main types:
- Cognitive Learning Strategies refer to the operators or steps in problem-solving that require transformation, direct analysis or synthesis of the learning materials. Rubin identifies six cognitive learning strategies: Classification / Verification, Guessing / Inductive Inferencing, Deductive Reasoning, Practice, Memorization, and Monitoring. All these contribute directly to the language learning.
- Metacognitive Learning Strategies are used to oversee control or self-direct the language learning. They involve different processes such as: planning, self-management or setting goals.

Oxford (1990) remarks that the aim of Language Learning Strategies is being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. She divides them into two main classes: direct and indirect which are further subdivided into six groups as follows:
- Direct Strategies
  - Memory Strategies
    - Creating mental linkages;
    - Applying images and sounds;
    - Reviewing well;
    - Employing action.
  - Cognitive Strategies
    - Practicing;
    - Receiving and sending messages strategies;
    - Analysing and reasoning;
    - Creating structure for input and output.
- Compensation Strategies
  - Guessing intelligently;
  - Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

- Indirect Strategies
  - Metacognitive Strategies
    - Centering your learning;
    - Arranging and planning your learning;
- Evaluating your learning.

- Affecting Strategies
  - Lowering your anxiety;
  - Encouraging yourself;
  - Taking your emotional temperature.

- Social Strategies
  - Asking questions;
  - Cooperating with others;
  - Empathising with others.

In Oxford’s system, the Memory strategies are those used for storing the new information, Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies the learners use to make sense of their learning, while Compensation strategies enable the learners to use the language either in writing or speaking despite the knowledge gaps. Direct Strategies, as Oxford says “require mental processing of the language” (Oxford, 1990, p. 37). Indirect Strategies provide indirect support for language learning. Metacognitive strategies help the learners to control their learning; Affective strategies assist learners to manage their emotions, confidence and attitude towards learning, while Social strategies facilitates interaction with other people, speakers of the target language.

Stern (1992) advances five main Language Learning Strategies. They are as follows:
1. Management and Planning Strategies; they are related to the learner’s intention to direct and control his own learning;
2. Cognitive Strategies; they refer to the learning steps that the learners take to transform the new material;
3. Communicative- Experiential Strategies;
4. Interpersonal Strategies;
5. Affective Strategies.

4. Communication strategies

The goal of English language teaching is to develop the learners’ communicative competence so that they will be able to interact and communicate with other people. Researchers agree that communication strategies are techniques used by the native and non-native speakers of any language, as well. The use of communication strategies is the best solution that compensates the learners’ lack of knowledge. Oral communication in a foreign language can be unsuccessful for several reasons. Most of the time, the pronunciation is the cause of the learner’s misunderstandings, the lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge combined with the learner’s insufficient socio-cultural or contextual knowledge of the conversation topics affect communication. The pressure of communicating in real time and the limited time to think increase the learner’s difficulty to communicate.

Researchers have developed and proposed new taxonomies of the communication strategies from time to time. These classifications differ mostly in the terminology the authors have used for the specific strategies. According to Domyei (1995) there are twelve types of Communication Strategies: 1. Message abandonment, 2. Topic avoidance, 3. Curcumlocution, 4. Approximation, 5. Use of all-purpose words, 6. Word coinage, 7. Use of non-linguistic means, 8. Literal translation, 9. Foreignizing, 10. Code switching, 11. Appeal for help, 12. Use of fillers / hesitation devices. Message abandonment is the strategy of leaving the message unfinished; the learner stops talking if lacks the vocabulary or the grammar knowledge. For example, the learner says: “he took the wrong way in mm...” (He does not continue his utterance). Topic avoidance is the strategy where learners try not to talk about concepts they find difficult to express. For example the learner avoids saying certain words because he either does not know or forget the English terms. Both Message abandonment and Topic avoidance are decisions for non-communication. Appeal for help is the strategy used by the students to ask other students or the teacher for help because they do not know or forget some words or structures. For example, the learner says: “Can you spell the word, please? / What is this?”

We consider that the Communicative Strategies can be of great help for many of our students. These strategies help the learners / students to continue a conversation when they do not know the words or the structures, to gain confidence in speaking, to increase their fluency, to appear interested in communicating, to develop a sense of autonomy. The role of the teacher is to help learners to deal with past frustrations and anxiety in order to build confidence. The students need to be encouraged, stimulated and motivated. The teacher’s positive attitude towards
his /her students helps them deal with frustration and avoid their refusal or abandonment. As teachers, we know that learning a foreign language takes time. So be patient with your students.

5. Learner autonomy

Autonomy means self-governing and it comes from the Greek word “autonomia” itself derived from “autonomos” (where “auto” means “self” and “nomos” means “law”). The term autonomy is imported originally from the field of politics and philosophy.

Learner Autonomy is a term that might be confused with self-instruction. The word autonomy carries a meaning of freedom and independence, in a general sense, and it is the ability to manage one’s affaires as opposed to a situation of dependence in which one is subjected to decisions and control from others.

Holec was the first who uses the term learner autonomy and defines it as: “... the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, he then specifies as:”to have, and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Here he includes:

- Determining the objectives;
- Defining the contents and progressions;
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used;
- Monitoring the procedure of acquisition;
- Evaluating what has been acquired.

Little. D (1991) refers to autonomy in terms that are more concrete:

- Autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction, in other words it is not limited to learning without a teacher;
- In the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of the responsibility on the part of the teacher;
- Autonomy is not something that teachers do to the learners, it is not another teaching method;
- Autonomy is not a single, easily described behavior;
- Autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners.

There are still instances in which learner autonomy is synonymous with self-access and especially with technology-based learning. The learner’s capacity of taking charge of his own learning is not innate. It must be learned and developed over a long period. The teachers’ role is to help their students to become more autonomous in their language learning.

During the English seminars, I tell my students to make their own choices about what they want to achieve, and to be ready to express themselves freely. The students are encouraged to bring their own materials, and to generate their own tasks. As teachers, we should support our students to use the effective learning strategies that transform them in autonomous learners, able to both take control over their own learning, and ready to accept suggestions and guidance from their teachers.

6. Conclusion

In the process of language learning both the teachers and the learners play important roles and have responsibilities to assume. To develop the learners’ communicative competence the teachers should expose them to and draw their attention to different communicative strategies. It is the teachers’ responsibility: to adapt activities so that the learners experience success, to simplify the language, in order to facilitate the learner’s acquisition and understanding, to use open-ended questions so that the learners can give alternative and flexible answers. The link between learning strategies and learner autonomy is very close. Autonomy means volition, and it offers opportunities for free choices on the part of the learners. Learning a new language takes time... make it pleasant and useful.

References


